



WER IST WALTER?

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Edited by

Elma Hašimbegović, Nicolas Moll and Ivo Pejaković

The Participation of Roma in the Yugoslav Partisan Movement as an Argument for their Recognition as a National Minority in Socialist Yugoslavia

Danijel Vojak

Short notes on the position of the Roma in Yugoslavia during World War II and their participation in the anti-fascist resistance

In April 1941, the army of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia capitulated and collapsed after a brief military conflict with the Axis Powers, which were led by the German army with the support of the Italian, Hungarian and Bulgarian armies. The territory of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was mostly occupied, while the Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska* – NDH) was founded on Croatian and Bosnian territory. One part of the population on those territories started to resist the new authorities as part of the anti-fascist Partisan movement. The Partisans were communist-led, with Josip Broz Tito at their helm.¹

In the NDH and Serbia, the persecution of the Roma population began very early, which included legal discrimination based on racial laws and deportation to camps, where Roma were used as forced labour, or were tortured and killed. More extensive and organised persecution of the Roma was carried out in NDH, where most Roma were deported to the Jasenovac camp in the middle of 1942 and subsequently killed.² The German authorities ruled the occupied Serbian territories with the help of Milan Aćimović, and later Milan Nedić, who formed a special government.³ The German

1 Dragutin Pavličević, *Povijest Hrvatske* (Zagreb: Naklada Pavičić, 2007), 399-461; Ivo Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918-2008* (Zagreb: Novi Liber-Europapress holding, 2008), 205-349.

2 Danijel Vojak, "Forgotten Victims of World War II: The Suffering of Roma in the Independent State of Croatia, 1941-1945", in *Jasenovac Concentration Camp: An Unfinished Past*, eds. Andriana Kužnar, Stipe Odak and Danijela Lucić (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2023), 188-223.

3 Rajko Đurić, *Povijest Roma: prije i poslije Auschwitzta* (Zagreb: Prosvjeta, 2007), 75-81.

occupying authorities in Serbia persecuted the Roma, and Roma were often shot dead along with Jews in retaliation for German soldiers killed in attacks by Partisan units.⁴ Roma were also victims of numerous mass crimes by the Serb nationalist Chetniks, who collaborated with the occupying forces.⁵ In Slovenia, which was annexed by Germany and Italy, Roma were deported to the Auschwitz concentration camp (on 2 December 1943, about 77 Roma) and also to other camps such as Dachau.⁶ In other areas of the occupied Kingdom of Yugoslavia like Montenegro and Macedonia, Roma were victims of the occupation regimes, especially the Bulgarians and Italians.⁷ Following the example of the Nazi authorities, the Bulgarian authorities in Macedonia sought to eradicate the Roma, isolate them socio-geographically, and prevent their nomadic lifestyle by forcing them to stay in one place.⁸

Roma resisted the Nazi authorities and their allies in ways such as escaping from deportations and from the camps themselves. Roma were also part of the Partisan movement and participated in armed resistance in different areas of occupied Yugoslavia. According to the available sources, some Roma joined the Partisan movement as a reaction to Ustasha violence against them, especially in mid-1942, when the mass deportations of Roma to Jasenovac took place.⁹ In the territory of occupied Macedonia, some Roma joined Partisan units at the end of the war and participated in battles in Kosovo, Serbia and Croatia.¹⁰

4 Milovan Pisarri, *Stradanje Roma u Srbiji za vreme Holokausta* (Beograd: Forum za primenjenu istoriju, 2014), 50-64; Đurić, *Povijest Roma*, 81.

5 Pisarri, *Stradanje Roma*, 71-72.

6 Vanek Šiftar, "Romi u Sloveniji 1940-1945", *Naše teme* 28, no. 7-8 (1984), 1334; Andrej Studen, *Nepriklagojeni in nevarni: podoba in status Ciganov v preteklosti* (Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2015), 174-175; Miran Komac, "Pobijanje Ciganov med drugo svetovno vojno v Sloveniji", *Zgodovinski časopis* 75 (2021), 216-239.

7 Momčilo Lutovac, *Romi u Crnoj Gori: od pojave do danas* (Ivangrad: Društvo prijatelja knjige, 1987), 91, 197-201; Elena Marušiakova and Vesselin Popov, "Bugarski Romi u Drugom svjetskom ratu", in *Romi u Drugom svjetskom ratu*, vol. 2 (*U sjeni svastike*), ed. Donald Kenrick (Zagreb: Ibis-grafika, 2009), 100; Mirdita Saliu, "Genocidot na Romite na Balkanskom poluostrvu u drugoj svjetskoj vojni", in *Prva konferencija za sećanje, odgovornost i prepoznatljivost na romite žrtve na holokaustot žrtvite na holokaustot vo Republika Severna Makedonija*, eds. Monika Markovska and Fatma Bajram Azemovska (Bitola: Nacionalna ustanova – Univerzitetska biblioteka "Sv. Kliment Ohridski"), (Cyrillic), 39-40.

8 Marushiakova and Popov, "Bugarski Romi", 100-102.

9 Luka Šteković, *Romi u virovitičkom kraju* (Beograd: Radnička Štampa, 1998), 49; Vladimir Dedijer, *Dnevnik: 1941-1944: Od 28. novembra 1942. do 10. novembra 1943*, vol. 2 (Rijeka: Liburnija, 1981), 469.

10 Daniel Petrovski, *Romski partizani: Izložba na romski partizani od Makedonija vo tekot na Vtorata svetska vojna: Katalog od izložba na fotografii* (Skopje: NVO Romano Ilo, 2023).

Also, according to some sources, Ustasha authorities started deporting Roma because of fear of their cooperation with the Partisan movement, as shown by the example of the deportation of Roma from the Zemun area in mid-1942 and in Derventa from May 1943.¹¹ In some areas of occupied Yugoslavia, special Roma Partisan units were formed, as shown by the example of the Gypsy Partisan unit, which was formed in July 1942 from about 40 Roma who were hiding in the forest between Kreštelovac and Goveđe Polje (district Daruvar in northeastern Croatia), and which had fled there due to fear of Ustasha deportations.¹²

Some Roma distinguished themselves particularly with heroism in the Partisan units, and many died fighting against occupying military forces.¹³ Among others, the Roma Partisan Stevan Đorđević Novak must be mentioned. Novak was one of the military commanders of a Partisan unit in eastern Serbia, where he was killed in 1943. In 1953, he was proclaimed a People's Hero in Yugoslavia, the only Roma to receive the title. Milica Katić from Grabovac, Serbia, also stands out as a particularly brave Partisan soldier. In 1942, she was arrested by the Chetniks due to her involvement with the Partisans; she was executed in the Banjica camp in Belgrade soon thereafter.¹⁴

11 Milan Bulajić, *Ustaški zločini genocida i suđenje Andriji Artukoviću 1986. godine*, vol. 2 (Beograd: Rad, 1988), 88, 168.

12 Šteković, *Romi u virovitičkom kraju*, 49-50.

13 Danijel Vojak, "Roma Resistance in Serbia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Macedonia during World War II", in *Re-thinking Roma Resistance throughout History: Recounting Stories of Strength and Bravery*, eds. Anna Mirga-Kruszelnicka and Jekatyerina Dunajeva (Budapest: European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture, 2020), 45-67; Danijel Vojak, "Otpor Roma za vrijeme Drugog svjetskog rata na području okupirane Kraljevine Jugoslavije, 1941.-1945", in *Zbornik radova Osma naučna konferencija sa međunarodnim učešćem: Stradanje Srba, Jevreja, Roma i ostalih na teritoriji bivše Jugoslavije*, eds. Života Radosavljević, et.al. (Beograd: Fakultet za poslovne studije i pravo, Beograd – Fakultet za informacione tehnologije i inženjerstvo, 2021), 343-366; Danijel Vojak, "Roma also Fought: The History of Romani Participation in the Anti-Fascist Movement in Croatia during World War II", *Roma Rights Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre*, 1 (2017), 9-16.

14 Milosav Bojić, "Posavski partizanski odred", in *Ustanak naroda Jugoslavije 1941*, book III, ed. Milinko Đurović (Beograd: Vojnoizdavački zavod JNA 'Vojno Delo', 1964), 17, 331; Sima Begović, *Logor Banjica 1941-1944.*, vol. 1 (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1989), 192; Đurić, *Povijest Roma*, 85.

Culture of remembrance of Roma victims in the Republics of socialist Yugoslavia

After World War II, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) was formed, mostly encompassing the territories of pre-war monarchist Yugoslavia. The Roma communities were almost destroyed during the war in Croatia, and partly in Serbia, Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, but they managed to survive. Other Roma communities in Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo did not suffer to the same extent during the war. According to the official data, the number of Roma in Yugoslavia ranged from 72.651 in 1948 to 168.098 in 1981. Roma made up a relatively small part of the population. Most lived in Serbia, Macedonia and Kosovo, while few lived in Montenegro and Slovenia.¹⁵ Numerous socioeconomic problems still prevailed among the Roma community, especially those related to insufficient education, unemployment and poor living conditions. This led some Roma to emigrate to Western Europe in the 1960s.¹⁶ At the same time, the legal position of Roma was not regulated and thus differed at the state and republic levels. For example, Roma were recognized as national minority or “nationality” (*narodnost*) only in the republics of Macedonia (1971) and Montenegro (in the early 1980s), while in the other republics they were considered an ethnic group.¹⁷

The suffering of Roma in World War II was consigned to oblivion in Yugoslavia, as in most other countries in Europe. The principal ideological concept of the new Yugoslav government was the “brotherhood and unity of all peoples and ethnicities”.¹⁸ Due to this collective unitary political

15 Milutin Prokić, “Socijalno-Ekonomske Karakteristike Roma u Jugoslaviji”, in *Razvitak Roma u Jugoslaviji: problemi i tendencije*, ed. Miroš Macura (Beograd: SANU, 1992), (Cyrillic), 97-114.

16 Judith Lathman, “Roma of the former Yugoslavia”, *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 27, no. 2 (1999), 206, 217.

17 Dragoljub Acković, “Konstucionalni problem Roma”, in *Razvitak Roma u Jugoslaviji: problemi i tendencije*, ed. Miroš Macura (Beograd: SANU, 1992), (Cyrillic), 17-23; Lathman, “Roma of the former Yugoslavia”, 206; Yaron Matras, *The Romani Gypsies* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015), 236. In the multinational state of Yugoslavia's complex constitutional order, there was distinction between “nations” (*narod*), which were considered the constituent Slavic peoples (Serbs, Croats, Slovenians, Montenegrins, Macedonians, and since 1961 also (Bosnian) Muslims), and “nationalities” (*narodnosti*), which included other Slavic and non-Slavic groups.

18 Ivo Komšić, “Komunizam i nacionalna svijest na kraju Drugog svjetskog rata u Jugoslaviji”, in *Kultura sjećanja: 1945. Povijesni lomovi i svladavanje prošlosti*, eds. Sulejman Bosto and Tihomir Cipek (Zagreb: Disput, 2009), 29-36; Marinko Gruić, “Romi – narodnost: Socijalna emancipacija i nacionalni afirmacija bivših nomada”, *Večernji list*, 28-29 August 1982, 37.

discourse in the Yugoslav – and thus Croatian – post-war socialist society, avoided highlighting individual ethnic groups as victims. Instead, the memorials and official commemorations used the collective term “victims of fascist terror (and/or) the occupiers”. The names of Roma victims were thus “drowned” in a mass of other victims, and could be discerned only to some extent by comparing their surnames to their place of residence.¹⁹ In 1968, the former Ustasha concentration camp Jasenovac was opened as a memorial complex, in which the Roma suffering was marginalised or ignored in several of the complex’s permanent exhibitions.²⁰ The first known monument dedicated to memory of Roma victims in Serbia was the “Crystal Flower” in the Šumarice Memorial Park (Memorial Park October) in Kragujevac, which was also opened in 1968. The monument was designed by Nebojša Delja and was dedicated to a 15-year-old Roma boy who was shot with a group of other adults who were all buried in a mass grave at this location.²¹ In 1970, Roma victims and survivors of the Ustasha mass crime of September 1944 in the village of Žerjavica near Bosanska Gradiška in Bosnia and Herzegovina erected the first known monument for Roma victims of World War II in the area of the former NDH. One of the initiators of this monument was Nadir Dedić, who was captured and deported by Ustasha to the Jasenovac camp.²² One year later, the only known memorial to the Roma victims of World War II in Croatia was erected in the village of Uštica (in the immediate vicinity of Jasenovac) and as a part of the Jasenovac memorial complex. This memorial’s development was initiated by the local branch of the Association of Veterans of the People’s Liberation War

19 Luka Šteković, *Romi u virovitičkom kraju* (Beograd: Radnička Štampa, 1998), 10-11, 28-33, 36, 47-49.

20 Dragoljub Acković, “Uštica – najveći romski grad mrtvih”, in *Odgovornost države Hrvatske za izvršeni genocid nad srpskim narodom i drugim narodima u periodu 1941.-1945. i 1991.-1995. (Okrugli sto – Beograd, 9. marta 2007.)*, ed. Smilja Tišma (Beograd: Udruženje zatočenika i potomaka zatočenika logora genocida u Nezavisnoj Državi Hrvatskoj 1941-1945, Pešić i sinovi, 2007), 45-62; Ljiljana Radonić, “Univerzalizacija holokausta na primjeru hrvatske politike prošlosti i spomen-područja Jasenovac”, *Suvremene teme* 3, no. 1 (2010), 53-62. For more on commemorations of Roma victims in socialist Croatia, see: Danijel Vojak, “Komemoracija romskih žrtava Drugog svjetskog rata u socijalističkoj Hrvatskoj, 1945.-1991”, *Zgodovinski časopis*, vol. 72, no. 3-4, 2018, 440-461; Danijel Vojak, Filip Tomić and Neven Kovačev, “Remembering the ‘Victims of Fascist Terror’ in the Socialist Republic of Croatia, 1970-1990”, *History and Memory* 31, no. 1 (2019), 118-150; Danijel Vojak, “Between oblivion and recognition: the commemorating Roma suffering in Croatia during the Second World War”, in *Preserving the Roma Memories*, eds. Hristo Kyuchukov, Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov (München: LINCOM GmbH, 2020), 118-141.

21 “Kragujevac”, *Spomenik Database*, <https://www.spomenikdatabase.org/kragujevac>.

22 Drago Lončar, “Romi ipak ne zaboravljaju”, *Arena*, 7 August 1985, 22-23.

of Yugoslavia. On that occasion, 21 mass graves of victims of the Jasenovac camp were marked in an area covering 4.700 square metres.²³ Serbian architect Bogdan Bogdanović had designed the monument for victims killed by Germans in December 1941 at Arapova Dolina, Serbia, in a retaliatory execution following the killing of three German officers near Leskovac. The vast majority – 293 of the 310 victims – were Roma, according to recent research. The monument was opened in December 1973, carrying the following inscription: “Here German fascists executed 500 patriots, including 320 Roma, on 11 December 1941”.²⁴

The issue of Roma participation in the Partisan movement as part of the political activity of Roma activists in socialist Croatia/Yugoslavia

From the previous chapter, it is evident that the Yugoslav authorities marginalised the culture of memory of the Roma victims, and that they did not hold commemorations, nor did they erect, with a few exceptions, monuments in memory of specific groups of victims. Roma victims were “drowned” in the ideological discourse of “victims of fascist terror”. This ideological model of Yugoslav unitary politics was also reflected in the neglectful attitude toward acknowledging Roma participation in the Partisan movement.

The general marginalisation of the persecution and fate of Roma during World War II, and more specifically the marginalisation of the role of Roma in the Partisan movement in the liberation of Yugoslavia, were two of the important programmatic points around which Roma intellectuals and community leaders gathered. In the late 1960s, some Roma intellectuals started the sociopolitical organisation of the Roma in the “Roma under the sun” (*Romi pod suncem*) movement, after which the cultural society “Roma” (*Rom*) was founded in Belgrade in 1969. Roma intellectuals such as

23 “Uredene grobnice u Uštici”, *Poruke*, 21 June 1971, 6.

24 Andrew Lawler, “Whose Memorial? The Arapova Dolina Monument in Leskovac, Serbia”, *Roma Rights Journal*, 1 (2017), 17-22. Lawler states that based on own research, he estimates that “several dozen memorials were created [during Socialist Yugoslavia] specifically related to the persecution of the country’s Roma community, at some times incorporated into larger memorial complexes, and at others as stand-alone memorials” (21). But unfortunately, a precise inventory of this kind of monument has not yet been done.

Slobodan Berberski, Sait Balić, Rajko Đurić and others gathered in this organisation. The society members' political and public activity was aimed at recognising the position of Roma as a national minority, which would enable the protection of their culture, customs, and language.²⁵ These Roma intellectuals were also very active on an international level. This applies especially to Berberski, a distinguished poet and member of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, who in 1971, was elected as the first president of the World Roma Congress, held in London. Berberski's political and broader significance in the Roma movement in Yugoslavia and beyond was partially highlighted through his military activity during the war, as he was a participant in the Partisan movement.²⁶ It is also important to highlight the similar activity of Đurić and Balić in the 1970s within the International Romani Union, which advocated for commemorating Roma victims of the genocide in Yugoslavia and also in Europe more generally.²⁷ According to some researchers, it was the Yugoslav Roma who were the bearers of the international political organisation of the Roma, because their social position in Yugoslavia was significantly better than that of Roma in other European countries.²⁸

The Roma movement, which was centred in Belgrade, successfully spread to other areas in Yugoslavia. It founded various branches, which then organised cultural events, publishing books in the Roma language, broadcasting radio and television shows in the Roma language, and more. In the 1980s, the social organisation of Roma in Croatia began. The first Roma association in Croatia was founded in Zagreb in 1986 under the name Roma Association Zagreb – Croatia (*Udruga Roma Zagreb – Hrvatska*). Then in 1988, the Roma heart (*Romsko srce*) Roma cultural and artistic society was founded, also in Zagreb.²⁹ This Roma organisation was part

25 See more in: Dragoljub Acković, *Nacija smo a ne Cigani: pregled aktivnosti romskih i neromskih društvenih i političkih organizacija i pojedinaca o romskoj problematici u nekadašnjoj i sadašnjoj Jugoslaviji* (Beograd: Rrominterpress, 2001).

26 Ian Hancock, *We are the Romani People – Ame sam e Rromane džene* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2012), 120-121; Becky Taylor, *Another Darkness, Another Dawn* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 212.

27 Matras, *The Romani Gypsies*, 252-253.

28 Taylor, *Another Darkness*, 213.

29 David M. Crowe, *A History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 222-231; Latham, "Roma of the former Yugoslavia", 206-207, 217-218; Filip Škiljan, "Kratok pregled povijesti nacionalnih manjina grada Zagreba", in *Nacionalne manjine u Zagrebu: Položaj i perspective*, eds. Dragutin Babić, Filip Škiljan and Drago Župarić-Ilić (Zagreb: Plejada, 2011), 106-107, 118-119.

of the Union of Roma Associations of Yugoslavia (*Savez udruženja Roma Jugoslavije*). The first Roma were also elected as political representatives in the local government in cities such as Niš in the 1980s.³⁰

In order to gain recognition as a national minority in the eyes of the public and the authorities, Roma in the Union of Roma Associations of Yugoslavia emphasised the Roma contribution to liberating Yugoslavia from the “occupier and his allies”.³¹ This political strategy aimed to socially and historically legitimise the Roma community in Yugoslavia as a group that participated in its liberation and the creation of a new state union. In such a public strategy, some Roma representatives not only emphasised the great extent of the suffering of their community in the war itself, but stated that the Roma joined the Partisan movement and thereby contributed to the liberation of the country. In 1989, one of the prominent Roma leaders of this movement, Rajko Đurić, spoke about this for a Yugoslav political magazine. Đurić noted that it was at the end of the 1960s that a “valid” discussion of the “Roma problem” began in Yugoslavia, focusing on the discussion on the regulation of their “national question” (referring to the recognition of their position as a nationality/national minority). Đurić pointed to Roma participation in the Partisan movement and the “trouble and misery of previous centuries, persecutions, discrimination, genocide” as key arguments in achieving these rights.³²

One of the events that stimulated stronger Roma activism occurred in 1974, when the new Yugoslav Constitution was adopted, in which Roma were recognized as a nationality/national minority at the state level, though not at the level of the republics. Because of this, Roma from Serbia, including the then-autonomous province of Kosovo gathered in societies in Obrenovac, Niš, Kragujevac, Vrnjačka Banja, Priština, Uroševac and Belgrade, and sent in, that same year, a request to the Constitutional Court of Yugoslavia to “equalise and standardise the constitutional provisions”, or, in other words, level the Roma community’s constitutional position at the state and republic levels. Slobodan Berberski played a significant role in formulating this request as the then-president of the World Roma Congress.³³

30 Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, *Državne politike pod komunizmom*, European Council/Projekat Obrazovanja Romske Dece u Evropi, <https://rm.coe.int/drzavne-politike-pod-komunizmom-informativna-brosura-o-istoriji-roma/16808b1c5e>.

31 Milan Bečević, “Izgubljeni u Ustavu”, *Danas*, 21 March 1989, 24.

32 Ibid.

33 M. Vesnić, “Narodnost po ustavu”, *Večernje novosti*, 18 June 1974, 5.

Strong political support for Roma efforts to acquire the status of a nationality came from some of the most prominent representatives of the government. This could be seen in 1978, when Aleš Bebler, a prominent Yugoslav politician, diplomat and constitutional judge, openly advocated with the Yugoslav authorities for the recognition of the Roma as a nationality.³⁴

The representatives of the Roma from Serbia were joined in the same efforts by the Roma from Croatia a few years later, and at the beginning of 1980, political institutions in Croatia began to discuss the regulation of the social and legal position of the Roma.

In April 1980, the Parliamentary Committee for Interethnic Relations of the Republican Conference of the Socialist Alliance of the Working People of Croatia (*Odbor Sabora za međunacionalne odnose Republičke konferencije Socijalističkog saveza radnog naroda Hrvatske*) initiated a project to create a scientific study on the position of the Roma in Croatia, titled "Social position of the Roma ethnic group in SR Croatia".³⁵ This was the first systematic scientific research on the position of Roma in Croatia and was carried out by the Zagreb Institute for Social Research (*Institut za društvena istraživanja*) and the Republic Institute for Social Work of the Socialist Republic of Croatia (*Republički zavod za socijalni rad Socijalističke Republike Hrvatske*). The research was published in 1985; one of the authors was Rajko Đurić, who wrote a section on the history of the Roma, in which he highlighted their specific suffering during World War II.³⁶

The debate on the position of the Roma took place at both the national and local levels. Here too, Serbian representatives of the Association of Societies "Roma" played a key role. The representatives were led by Saito Balić, who at the beginning of November 1980, met directly in Zagreb with representatives of the Croatian republic such as Marin Grujić, on which occasion it was agreed to start and establish a special "initiative groups" within Croatian political institutions. These institutions included the previously mentioned Parliamentary Committee for Interethnic Relations, which would aim to "start the processes" between Roma and local authorities in

34 Crowe, *A History of the Gypsies*, 227.

35 Croatian State Archives Parliament of the Socialist Republic of Croatia/*Hrvatski državni arhiv Sabor Socijalističke Republike Hrvatske* – HR-HDA-1081, Saziv 1978. – 1982., box 125A, "Zapisnik 10. sjednice Odbora za međunacionalne odnose 10. travnja 1980. u 10 sati", 5-6.

36 Rajko Đurić, "Romi u našim krajevima", in *Društveni položaj Roma u SR Hrvatskoj. Analitička informacija* (Zagreb: Institut za društvena istraživanja Sveučilišta u Zagrebu; Republički zavod za Socijalni rad SR Hrvatske), 137-152.

Croatia.³⁷ Soon after that, the City Conference of the Socialist Union of Working People Zagreb discussed the social position of the Roma in Zagreb and the question of obtaining the status of nationality for the Roma.³⁸

The central place where representatives of the state and local authorities gathered with minority representatives was Lipovljani in the Croatian region of Slavonia. The event was called the Lipovljani meetings (*Lipovljanski susreti*). At the Lipovljani meetings in 1981, the issue of studying the history of minority participation in Yugoslav lexicography, specifically the *Enciklopedija Narodnooslobodilačke borbe* (Encyclopedia of the National Liberation Struggle), was discussed. On that occasion, Jefto Šašić, a prominent general and “People’s hero of Yugoslavia”, pointed out that nationalities were not “given enough attention” in that lexicographic project, stating that

... when it comes to the Roma, they are not sedentary, and, regardless of whether they are an ethnic group or a nationality, they are scattered everywhere and have their own way of life. I know that one group in Niš is working on the question of Roma participation in the People’s Liberation Struggle. 10 to 15 survivors are living in Novska, but who will say anything more about those Roma who perished with the Partisans. It is necessary to carry out more research about that group together with them...³⁹

In early July 1982, a Roma organisation in Croatia’s first participation in commemorative activity was recorded. Around 200 members of the Rom cultural-educational association from Zagreb visited Uštica, a part of Jasenovac Memorial Site. On that occasion, Rasim Bajrić, president of the Roma Council of Zagreb, stressed that numerous crimes were committed against the Roma population during the war and that they must not be forgotten.⁴⁰

During the gathering of representatives of the authorities and representatives of minority communities at the *Lipovljani meetings* in late August 1982, a roundtable was held on the position of the Roma in Croatia. Presentations were given on the history of the Roma and their discrimination, the Roma language and customs, as well as social and legal problems.

37 “O Romima s Romima”, *Vjesnik*, 8 November 1980, 4.

38 B.K., “Romi još bez statusa”, *Borba*, 27 November 1980, 6.

39 “Stenografski zapisnik”, in *Lipovljanski susreti '81*, ed. Jovan Mirković (Lipovljani: Organizacijski odbor “Lipovljanski susreti”, 1981), 63.

40 “Romi u posjeti spomen-području Jasenovac”, *Poruke*, 4 July 1982, 6.

Nikola Nikolić presented on the subject of Roma suffering in the Jasenovac camp. Marinko Grujić gave an introductory presentation titled: “Roma: Some current issues of social emancipation and national affirmation”. At that time, Grujić was serving as a member of the Presidency of the Socialist Union of the Working People of Croatia, which was the largest sociopolitical organisation in socialist Croatia. His very presence at this conference and his introductory presentation on the position of the Roma indicate that the Croatian republican authorities had a significant interest in regulating the social position of the Roma. Grujić pointed out in his presentation that Roma had been “cruelly persecuted and mistreated” throughout history, especially during World War II, but they nevertheless managed to survive.⁴¹ And in this context, he described Roma participation in the Partisan movement:

Witnesses and testimonies undoubtedly say the Roma had boldly resisted and fought. Many went to the Partisans, and there are fighters of the first hour (*prvorborci*) and heroes among them. Many have laid down their lives for freedom in the national liberation struggle. Even in the infamous Jasenovac camp, most of them showed stunning dignity and courage, which little is known about. There are testimonies [records of Dr. Mladen Iveković, Dr. Nikola Nikolić and others] on the conduct and resistance of Roma, on the attempts of the escapes, which most often ended with death, on Roma women who tried to save their children with all their strengths and means, on a Roma hero (whose name is not known to this day) who threw himself into the Sava and cursed the villain Pavelić, to whom the guards were shooting using rifles and machine guns, even bombs were used, and he dived into the water and went out to the surface and again he cursed the villain Pavelić and so until the moment the machine gun simply cut him down. Roma, along with our other peoples and nationalities, fought for freedom. They were an active factor – the subject of freedom. Unfortunately, very few of them lived to see the end of the war. The occupier and the Ustashes killed the vast majority of them. Part of them died in the national liberation struggle. Victims and suffering

41 Marinko Grujić, “Romi: Neka aktualna pitanja socijalne emancipacije i nacionalne afirmacije”, in *Lipovljanski susreti* '82, ed. Blaženka Špoljarić (Lipovljani: Organizacijski odbor “Lipovljanski susreti”, 1982), 21.

of Roma obliges us all. And something else – a patriotic feeling, deep attachment and love for our common socialist Yugoslavia.⁴²

In a further presentation, Grujić criticised the state government for not legally regulating the position of Roma as a nationality in the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Croatia. Therefore, he emphasised four “important reasons” why the Roma must be granted such a status. The first of his reasons was that the Roma, together with other nations and nationalities, fought for Yugoslavia.⁴³

Along with Grujić, Sait Balić gave a presentation at the same gathering, and emphasised the contribution of Roma in the National liberation struggle:

In our liberation revolution, Roma immediately responded to the invitation of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and, together with all nations and nationalities, made a great contribution to the liberation of our country from the occupiers. A large number of Roma also gave their lives for freedom, brotherhood and unity. A considerable number of Roma were among the first at the invitation of the Communist Party with a weapon in their hand as the bearers of the fight against the occupiers, and among them the honorary place is taken by the national hero Novak, who at one time was also in the entourage of Marshal Tito. During World War II, the Roma in our country were faced with the threat of being exterminated, they were ordered to wear visible yellow strips with the inscription “Cigonja”, their freedom of movement was limited and they were not allowed to access public places. A large number of Roma were shot in our country in World War II, and at the execution sites in Kragujevac, Niš, Leskovac, Kraljevo, Jajinci, Jasenovac and many other places across our country there remained indelible mounds as living witnesses of how many Roma were persecuted, destroyed, but not annihilated, with other patriots. It should be emphasised with certainty that the Roma were not in enemy ranks and that they had always been on the side of the proletariat, because they have been proletarians alone since ancient times.⁴⁴

42 Ibid., 26.

43 Ibid., 28.

44 Sait Balić, “U SFRJ svi narodi i narodnosti su ravnopravni”, in *Lipovljanski susreti '82*, ed. Blaženka Špoljarić (Lipovljani: Organizacijski odbor “Lipovljanski susreti”, 1982), 39-40.

In the rest of the presentation, Balić emphasised the need to recognise the Roma community with the status of nationality so that Roma would thus acquire equality with other nationalities and participate in cultural, public and political life, thus “correcting a perennial omission” towards them as a people who “has suffered a lot in their history so far”.

The media reported from this meeting discussing the Roma position. A part of the media coverage particularly emphasised the issue of the persecution of Roma and the brave resistance against the Ustasha authorities during World War II in the context of the current need of obtaining the status of the nationality for the Roma.⁴⁵

One of the issues on which a common agreement was reached was initiating the process of recognizing the status of the nationality of Roma in Croatia. At the end of 1982, the Parliamentary Committee for Interethnic Relations submitted a proposal to recognize the status of nationality to Roma to the Parliament of the Socialist Republic of Croatia. The same proposal was sent to other federal and republican institutions in order to “agree a common solution with them”. Marinko Grujić explained the proposal at a session of this parliamentary committee, stating that “numerous elements justify the establishment of the status of nationality” to Roma, such as their more than six centuries of presence in Croatian areas, participation “in the construction” of the new state, and the fact that “their language, grammar, culture, customs and ethnic identity that have been preserved despite the centuries of persecution”.⁴⁶ Interestingly, preservation despite persecution is used here as an argument for the achievement of the political rights to nationality, and preservation can also be seen as a kind of resistance. At the same time, Grujić pointed out that a similar process for recognising the rights of Roma in other republics had not been “solidified”, which is why he would address them directly and ask for concrete “solutions”.⁴⁷

At the same session in early December 1982, the Parliamentary Committee for Interethnic Relations adopted an action plan for implementing measures to improve the position of Roma in Croatia. It envisaged measures related to the improvement of education, cultural development (the initiation of Romology Studies at the Department of Indology at the Faculty

45 Josip Vuković, “Društveni položaj Roma (2): Put do afirmacije”, *Komunist*, 10 September 1982, 14; Josip Vuković, “Društveni položaj Roma (1)”, *Komunist*, 3 September 1982, 13.

46 “Romima status narodnosti”, *Vjesnik*, 4 December 1982, 5.

47 Ibid.

of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb was mentioned), living conditions and employment.⁴⁸ The action plan was discussed in the Parliament and in the Constitutional Commission, but in this case their opinion is unknown. What is known is that at that time it was not decided that the Roma would become a nationality in Croatia.⁴⁹ Two years later, at the Lipovljani meetings, Marinko Grujić, in his report on the position of nationalities (national minorities), spoke about the Roma in a special agenda item, stating that there is a justified need to establish their status as a nationality in Croatia and Yugoslavia and that this will be changed as part of the “regular procedure” in voting on amendments to the constitution. He pointed out that they are a “suffering people” who, despite the attempt to exterminate them, managed to preserve their own identity, language and culture, and he considered their gaining the status of nationality as a “civilisational event of great importance” for the Roma in Yugoslavia and beyond.⁵⁰ It should be noted that at that time, Grujić was the president of the Zagreb daily *Vjesnik* and was a member of the Central Committee of the Union of Communists of Yugoslavia, which again indicates a certain continuity of interest of the central republican authorities in bettering the situation of the Roma.

The issue of regulating the position of the Roma as a nationality was brought up again at the end of the same decade. This time, Roma representatives, such as Rajko Đurić, in their capacity as members of the World Roma Organization, demanded in 1989 that the Roma be recognized as nationality/national minority, which would enable them to “finally” exercise their right to better education and cultural affirmation, so that they no longer be “second-class citizens”.⁵¹ In 1989, the Parliamentary Committee for Interethnic Relations discussed the constitutional position of the Roma in Croatia, emphasising that they all have civil rights and additional rights in the development of their culture and education.⁵² However, even then, the decision was not made to recognise Roma as a nationality, and further activities in this regard were stopped by the outbreak of wars that led to the end of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The Roma issue then

48 Ibid.

49 Bečejić, “Izgubljeni u Ustavu”, 25; “Romima status narodnosti”, 5.

50 Marinko Grujić, “Moramo biti dosljedniji u oživotvorenju i svakodnevnom ostvarivanju ustavnih prava narodnosti”, in *Lipovljanski susreti '84*, ed. Ante Mihaljević (Lipovljani: Organizacijski odbor “Lipovljanski susreti”, 1985), 53-54.

51 “Narodnost Rom”, *Danas*, 1 May 1990, 34; Crowe, *A History of the Gypsies*, 231.

52 “Informacija o društvenom položaju Roma u Hrvatskoj”, *Delegatski vjesnik*, 9 September 1989, 17.

moved to the governments of the Yugoslav successor states, such as the Republic of Croatia.

Conclusion

After World War II, the fate of Roma victims was relegated to the margins of most European countries. One of these countries was Yugoslavia, whose authorities shaped the culture of remembrance without mentioning the victims' ethnic identity, classifying them all as "victims of fascist terror". As a result of this policy, Roma victims were "drowned" in such an ideological discourse. This was most visible in the non-mentioning of their identity in commemorations and monuments. In parallel, the total scale of the Roma population's suffering was insufficiently known and widely ignored by scientific research in Yugoslav historiography. The consequence was that until the 1970s, the wider Yugoslav public was almost unaware that the Roma were victims of the genocidal policies of the authorities in Croatia and Serbia during World War II and that Roma had also actively participated in the Partisan resistance movement. Such marginality in the public memory and the scientific research was a reflection of the Roma population's permanently socioeconomically marginal position in Yugoslavia.

A special problem for the Roma community in Yugoslavia was the non-recognition of their position as a nationality in all Yugoslav republics, which made their social integration and systematic protection of their culture, customs and language difficult. The initiative to change the public discourse and alter the culture of remembrance came precisely from the Roma community itself, whose prominent intellectuals organised themselves in Belgrade at the end of the 1960s and were instrumental in spreading the Roma movement to other areas of Yugoslavia. They also played an important role in establishing the international gathering of Roma at the World Roma Congresses. In the mid-1970s, Slobodan Berberski initiated the constitutional process of recognising the position of the Roma as a nationality. One of his key arguments for this recognition rested on highlighting the Roma community's suffering during the war and, in particular, Roma participation in the anti-fascist (Partisan) resistance movement. At that time, Roma intellectuals increasingly emphasised the bravery of the Roma Partisans and their contribution to the liberation of the Yugoslav state. Such

a policy, especially at the end of the 1970s, was increasingly accepted by Croatian political institutions and Marinko Grujić, as a prominent official at the level of the Croatian republican government, openly spoke in public that the Roma must be granted the status of a nationality because of their prominent participation in the partisan movement, which liberated and created the new Yugoslav state.

Despite such mostly declarative support from high-ranking Croatian officials, the actual recognition of the Roma as a nationality did not occur and was furthermore postponed with the outbreak of numerous wars on the territory of Yugoslavia and the state's overall collapse. Despite this, the active advocacy of Roma equality in Yugoslav society, initiated and carried out by the Roma themselves, was a significant indicator of the increasingly active political and wider social activity of the Roma community in Yugoslavia. Precisely on the basis of such action, the Roma increasingly successfully fought for their rights in the new states created after the breakup of Yugoslavia. Thus, the Roma community's status as a national minority in the Republic of Croatia, with all the rights to protect its cultural and ethnic identity, was finally achieved in 2002 by a special constitutional law. This was possible due to the prominent activity of Roma intellectuals thirty years earlier, who themselves demanded equality based on their merits in participating in the Partisan resistance movement.

In parallel, the suffering and resistance of Roma during World War II has slowly attracted more attention in the public sphere and also in research, first in Europe in general, then also more specifically in the Yugoslav successor states. One of the first political initiatives for establishing international commemoration for Roma victims of genocide came in late June 2009, when the Roma National Congress and International Roma Union proposed the commemoration of the International Remembrance Day of Roma Victims of the Pharrimos (Holocaust) to the Council of Europe. The commemoration was proposed for 2 August, in memory of 2 August 1944, when around 4,200 Roma were killed in the Auschwitz concentration camp. Commemorations were then held in many European countries. In Croatia, they started on 2 August 2012 at the Roma cemetery in Uštica village near Jasenovac. The commemoration was organised by Roma organisations.⁵³ The second important step came in April 2015, when after a

53 Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov, "Holocaust, Porrajmos, Samudaripen...Tworzenie nowej mitologii narodowej", *Studia Romologica*, Vol. 3 (2010), 75-94; Danijel Vojak, "Roma Holocaust in Croatia: from marginalization to formal recognition and commemoration", in *Beyond the Roma*

long mobilisation by Roma associations, the European Parliament finally approved a resolution recognising the genocide of Roma during World War II.⁵⁴ Additionally, for the past several years, Roma associations and especially youth activists, commemorate each 16 May as “Romani Resistance Day”, referring to the revolt of Roma prisoners against their extermination in the Gypsy Family Camp (*Zigeunerfamilienlager*) in Auschwitz II-Birkenau concentration camp on 16 May 1944.⁵⁵ However, this event is historically controversial, and for many Roma associations it is important to have a larger understanding of resistance and not only to focus on one specific event.

In the post-Yugoslav space, there recently have been some scientific studies that show the variety of attitudes present in Roma resistance. These include avoiding deportation and escaping from camps, participating in musical formations or as armed fighters in Partisan units, or helping and hiding Partisans.⁵⁶ In 2020, a more general European research project, including the post-Yugoslav space, led to the publication of a book providing a panorama of Roma resistance in different European countries during World War II.⁵⁷ However, the topic of Roma resistance still remains insufficiently researched, as is the case with many other issues related to Roma history in most European historiographies. Despite such marginalised historiographical interest, the issue of Roma resistance is an important area of research, as it points to Roma as active individuals in the fight against Nazi authorities and their allies during World War II. In this way, it also underlines that they have to be seen as an integral part of the wider history of resistance against Nazism in Europe.⁵⁸

Holocaust: From Resistance to Mobilisation, eds. Thomas M. Buchsbaum and Sławomir Kaprański (Kraków: TAIWPN Universitas, 2017), 131-149.

54 “Resolution on the occasion of International Roma Day – anti-Gypsyism in Europe and EU recognition of the memorial day of the Roma genocide during World War II”, *European Parliament*, 15 April 2015, <https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/summary.do?id=1385420&t=e&l=en>.

55 See for example “16 May 1944 – a day to remember”, *Council of Europe*, 15 May 2020, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/roma-and-travellers/-/16-may-1944-a-day-to-remember>.

56 See the literature mentioned above in footnote 13.

57 Anna Mirga-Kruszelnicka and Jekatyerina Dunajeva, eds., *Re-thinking Roma Resistance throughout History: Recounting Stories of Strength and Bravery* (Budapest: European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture, 2020). The book is available online as a pdf: <https://eriac.org/re-thinking-roma-resistance-book-roma-resistance/>. For more about this project, which was led by the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERiac) and its different outputs, see: <https://eriac.org/re-thinking-roma-resistance/>.

58 The research for this paper was carried out as part of the project “Forgotten places of suffering of the Unsuitables: Genocide of Roma in the Independent State of Croatia: research, memorialization, education – FORGOT-GENROMISC”, funded by European Union programme NextGeneration EU (01/08-73/23-2519-8).

WER IST WALTER?

Resistance against Nazism, fascism, occupation and collaboration occurred throughout Europe during World War II. But how much do we know about this history in other European countries? Gathering 32 contributions and case studies on the history of this resistance, as well as on its transmission after 1945, especially in museums, the present book is an invitation to look at resistance in Europe in an interdisciplinary, international, transnational and comparative perspective. It is the result of the international research project “Wer ist Walter? Resistance against Nazism in Europe” which gathered historians, curators and other researchers mainly from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, France and Germany.



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